



Fires bring new life to prairie

In the spring of 2007, photographer Jane Fulton Alt celebrated the birth of her first grandchild. It was around the same time that Alt learned her sister Peggy had been diagnosed with ovarian cancer.

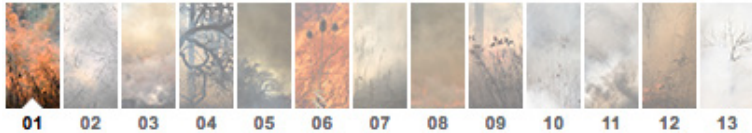
The juxtaposition left her stunned. “They’ll always be linked together in my mind,” Alt said.

As Alt grappled with these two conflicting events, she witnessed a controlled prairie burn outside Chicago and was immediately struck by the burn’s “visual and expressive potential.” She joined a team of four ecologists and set out to photograph her first prairie burn.

Alt found unexpected comfort in the fire and smoke. In the midst of the burn, she saw an ambiguous space where “life and death are not contradictory, but harmonized as a single process to be embraced as a whole.”

Although burns are violent and destructive by nature, they are also regenerative, Alt said. The burns eliminate invasive plant species and fertilize the ground for new life. “Certain seeds, in order to germinate, need to burn,” she said.

For the past seven years, Alt has returned to the prairies, woodlands and wetlands of Lake Forest, Illinois, to photograph controlled burns. A typical prairie burn lasts four to five hours.



“It’s very taxing,” Alt said. “The smoke can be blinding, and sometimes I am so overwhelmed by the heat that I have to leave the site for relief. The smell and the sensation of the burn permeates everything I carry, clinging to me for days.” Yet during her first five years working on the project, she didn’t wear a mask. “I always felt like I didn’t want anything compromising my experience of the fires and the burns,” she said.

Alt’s approach to photographing prairie burns is artistic rather than documentary. She presents her images in such a way that there is no reference to the landscape; she focuses instead on the ephemeral, mysterious layers of smoke and the full force of the fire. “I have no interest in a realistic rendering of the landscape,” she said. “Rather, I look for visual references of a place that my mind cannot grasp.”

It’s those meditative qualities of the burns that inspired Alt to publish a book of her images, “The Burn.” She weaved together 39 of her photographs with original poetry and essays to create a visual and introspective experience for readers. “It’s a really quiet book,” she said. “You just have to sit with it to let it speak to you.”

“The Burn” was published in the memory of her sister Peggy, who died in 2012.

“She knew the book would be dedicated to her,” Alt said. “Once she passed away, I knew I could start working on the book. It helped me deal with my grief. ... I honestly feel like the work is what it is because of what I was going through at that particular point of my life. The whole project was really a gift to me.”

Alt sees the burns, and her book, as metaphors for the human condition. “Regardless of race and economics, we all come into the world and we all leave the world,” she said. “That’s just part of nature.” - *Allison Love, CNN*